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## SHAMAN, THESPIAN, SABOTEUR:

### Marcos Kurtycz and the Ritual Poetics of Institutional Profanation

*Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra*

L'intimité est la violence.

Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (1974)

The profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation.

Giorgio Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation' (2007)

Iconic figure of Mexico's early performance art scene, Marcos Kurtycz moved from Warsaw to Mexico City in 1968. At the time of his arrival, the country was experiencing one of its most difficult political crises of the twentieth century. Days before the opening of the locally-hosted 1968 Olympic Games, paramilitary police opened fire on a peaceful protest in the 'Plaza de las Tres Culturas' in Tlatelolco, massacring tens or even hundreds of students.<sup>1</sup> This demonstration of state violence showcased the country's authoritarianism and sparked a series of critical responses to the regime of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the art world.<sup>2</sup> Yet, according to Olivier Debrouse and Cuauhtémoc Medina, the 1968 crisis also 'marked the beginning of an era of cultural repression', directed especially against young people and so-called 'counter-cultural' or 'alternative' art circuits (2014, 23). Furthermore, the state's crackdown on emerging, experimental artists was accompanied by an official disregard for new media and a lack of state support for contemporary art, resulting in what the authors describe as 'institutionalized amnesia' towards more than two decades of Mexican art, extending from the late 1960s to the early 1990s (21).

From the early days of his life in Mexico, Kurtycz collaborated closely with this emerging generation of critical young artists working either against or at the margins of official art institutions and bringing explicitly political concerns to their creations.<sup>3</sup> Kurtycz shared these artists' interest in using certain forms of (often parodic or ludic) violence to expose other, less visible forms of state violence. Nevertheless, Kurtycz's performances are also somewhat distinctive in their approach to violence, for they joined together an aggressive and intimidating rhetoric directed against what he saw as the 'stuffiness of the Mexican art scene' with an embrace of ritual (Camnitzer 2007, 107). The artist's unusual association of the violence of avant-gardism with a critical, profanatory and playful approach to ritual will therefore be my central object of attention, as I seek to shed light upon what, speaking of Kurtycz's work, Mónica Mayer identified as 'an unusual force that could combine violence and vulnerability' (1996, 2).

This chapter will almost fully revolve around one of Kurtycz's early performances, entitled *Potlatch* after Georges Bataille's writings on this notion. *Potlatch* was partly conceived of as a mock guerrilla assault, as it involved breaking into an exhibition opening without consent and publicly burning a painting with acid. Rather than merely seeking to produce destruction and aggressively shock the audience, however, the performance unfolded into a celebration of loss over accumulation, contact over confinement and self-critique, if not self-sabotage or self-erasure, over conceited self-affirmation. Exploring the work's ritual elements in light of Bataille and Victor Turner's understanding of sacrifice, I shall suggest that in Kurtycz's *Potlatch* the political critique of the art institution and the embodiment of a 'secular rite' (Bell 1992, 38) continuously look back upon each other. For, as I intend to show, the artist's destruction, or more precisely ritual transformation, of his painted canvas during *Potlatch* is not only an attack on an art object but also an intervention in a particular 'artistic regime' and its accompanying, constitutive prohibitions in the spatial, temporal and sensuous terrains (Rancière 2000).

## *Potlatch*

On the evening of 1 November 1979, the ‘Day of the Dead’, as a group of artists were celebrating the opening of the exhibition *Muertos en el Foro* at the Forum of Contemporary Art (FCA) in Mexico City, Kurtycz broke into the gallery in order to publicly destroy an abstract, unframed painting upon which he had been working in his workshop over the past months. As detailed in a script outlining his action that the artist kept in his personal archive, Kurtycz conceived of this live action as a potlatch or ‘gift of rivalry’ (Bataille 1988, 63). Signed by Kurtycz, the script reads:

The work, manifestly gothic, involves the ritual destruction of an object that is significant to the author’ through a ritual that puts both performer and audience at risk. This is a certain form of sacrifice known by the name of potlatch. This particular sacrifice is analysed by Salvador Elizondo and George [sic] Bataille in the prologues to Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda*.<sup>4</sup>

Following this description, the document details that *Potlatch* was strictly divided into eight steps or moments. The performance began with Kurtycz’s abrupt, bare-chested entry into the venue carrying a series of objects whose presence in a *vernissage* could only seem strange, if not openly dangerous, including marigold flowers [*flores de cempazuchitl*], a *petate*<sup>5</sup> and an axe. The artist proceeded to prepare the ritual’s setting in front of one of the gallery’s empty walls. In silent concentration, Kurtycz unrolled the *petate* along the floor so that it was perpendicular to the wall and used soil to outline a human silhouette on its surface. He then placed two pedestals on top of each other and climbed onto them in order to hang and fully unfurl what would become the ritual offering: a large abstract painting featuring white, formless stains over a dark, and very long, unframed cotton canvas (see Figure 7). According to the artist,

the painting had been made over several months, using a ‘sophisticated solar technique’, which combined the application of chlorine with long periods of solar exposure.<sup>6</sup>

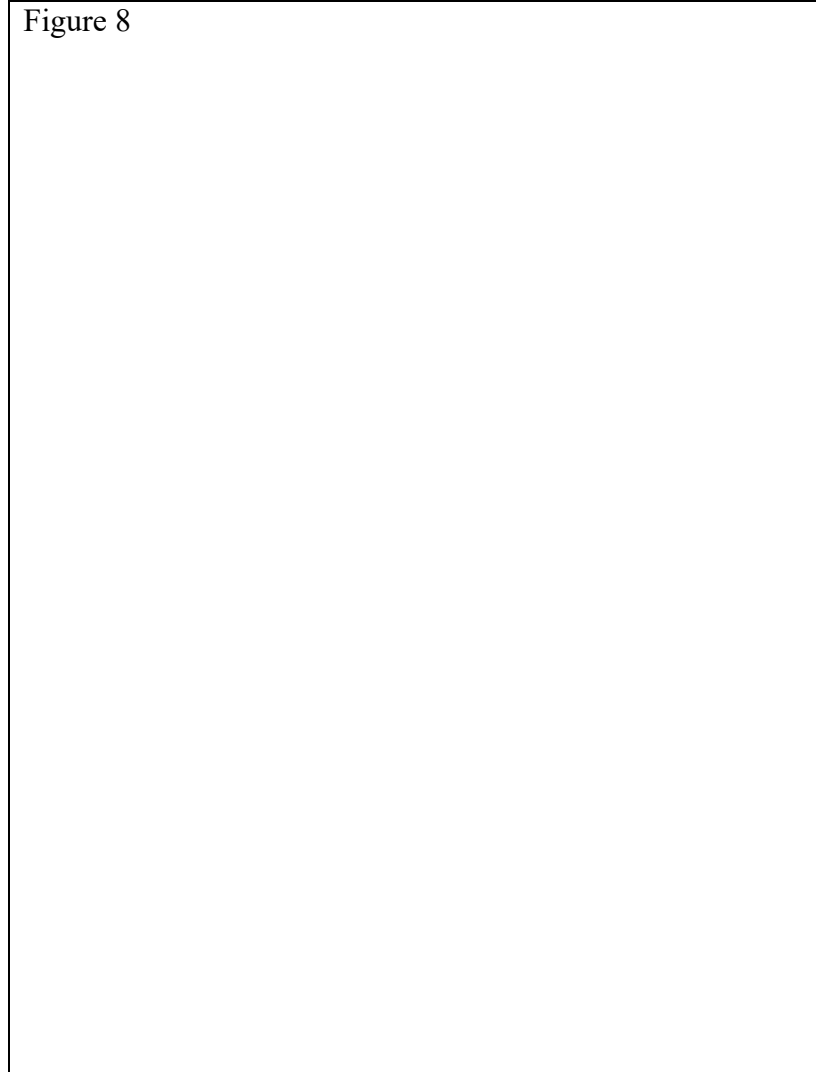
Figure 7



Upon hanging the painting on the wall and tautening its lower edges with two rocks (in order to secure the fabric at an angular incline), Kurtycz attached the flowers to the canvas’ uppermost edge and hid a bottle of corrosive acid behind them. As he carried out these vertical and

horizontal movements, which involved unfolding, exposing, placing and creating objects associated with death and rest – thus creating an ephemeral ‘Day of the Dead’ offering or installation – a number of people started to form a circle around him. It was in front of this improvised and somewhat puzzled audience that, from the top of the platform, Kurtycz pulled the axe from his belt and firmly smashed the bottle of acid, causing the burning substance to spill over the canvas, ultimately leaving it entirely in shreds (see Figure 8). Exposing (*déchirant*)<sup>7</sup> the canvas’s debased materiality, the fall of the acid marked a break in time and a spectacle of definitive destruction, whereby a painting that was itself ritually produced was ‘sacrificed’ for the sake of a single lived and witnessed moment. The flowers, which also fell as a result of the axe’s stroke, landed on the now disfigured and pierced human soil silhouette, which was also burned by the corrosive substance. According to the timing recorded in the artist’s documentation, for roughly 30 seconds,<sup>8</sup> both artist and public witnessed this ritualized dance and attack that, as a whole, entailed: a disruptive attempt to sabotage the normal development of an art event; the sacrifice or desecration of an artwork in the place usually reserved for its consecration and the creation of a situation of uncertainty and potential danger within the gallery (see Figures 9-10). Hence, in its secular and violent rituality, uncannily akin to an undercover guerrilla operation, Kurtycz’s action combined the affective potentiality aroused by the spectacle of destruction (and the shock of a startling attack) with a more subtle intervention in the viewers’ perception of time and space. Furthermore, Kurtycz’s *Potlatch* made visible an ephemeral, cyclical process from the moment of composition to degeneration, while provoking the physical relocation of the artist and its impromptu public through contingent, potentially confused or uneasy movements.

Figure 8

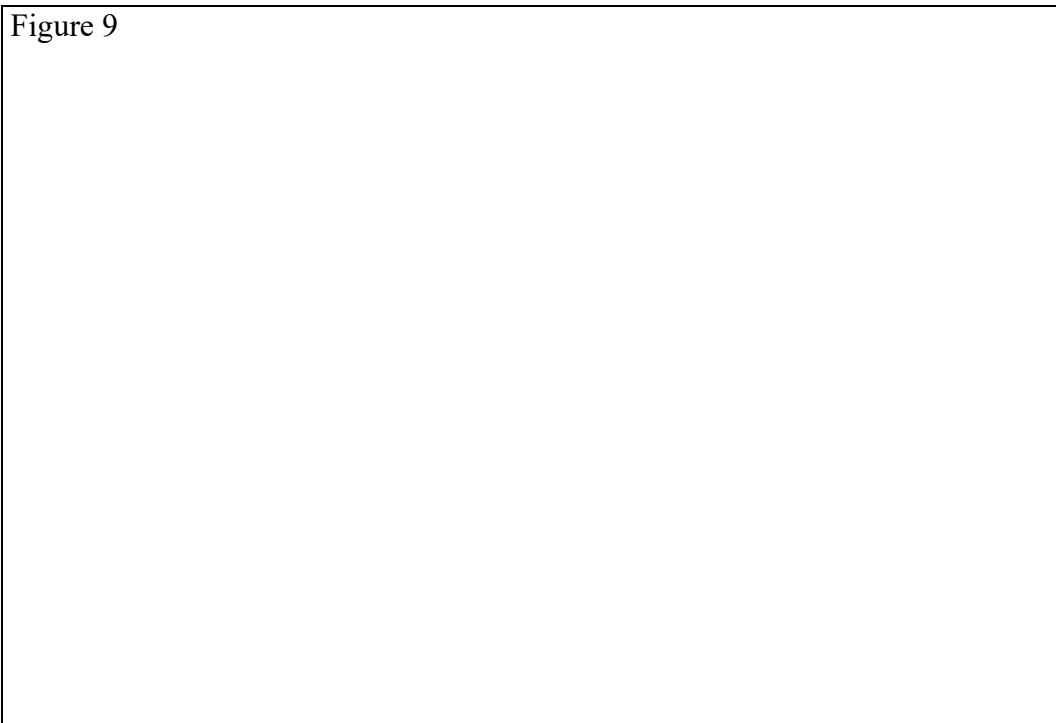


### *A System of Giving*

While Kurtycz borrowed the concept of potlatch from Bataille, the latter (mis)appropriated it in turn from Marcel Mauss' study of gift exchange among so-called archaic societies (2002 [1925]).<sup>9</sup> In Chinook, the language of Chinookan peoples from North America, potlatch means 'to feed' or 'to consume', but its use refers to a 'total system of giving' that involves a series of feasts, fairs and rituals, where the assembled tribe attempts to outdo rival chiefs by means of lavish splendour (Mauss 2002, 7). The destruction of wealth through potlatch is thus part of a societal contract that extends beyond the circulation of wealth into the structuring of the community through the production of ranks and social hierarchies. However, as Roger Sansi suggests, Bataille was less interested in this aspect of Mauss' theory – which grounds it in a

social contract of sorts – than in ‘the creative potential of “the pleasure of expense”’ (2014, 92). Indeed, Bataille’s interest in potlatch results, first, from the fact that it is an institution that invites the subject to explore forms of exchange and communication that are not primarily led by a search for accumulation. Second, the centrality of potlatch in Bataille’s reading of Mauss derives from its capacity ‘to turn expense into public spectacle’ (92). In Bataille, then, ‘the ultimate outcomes of this spectacle in terms of hierarchy, ranking or fame, what it is made *for*, are less interesting than the very act of expenditure’ (92).

Figure 9



One can observe significant affinities between Bataille’s theory of potlatch and Kurtycz’s own performative appropriation of this concept. To begin with, the strictly economic aspect of potlatch was constitutive of Kurtycz’s understanding of live art. Dismissing the Anglo-American concept of performance as a ‘linguistic miscarriage’, Kurtycz described each of his performances as an *artefacto* or art-i-fact. Perhaps inspired by the ideas of Polish theorist Jerzy Ludwinski, who replaced the notion of the work of art with ‘artistic fact’ (Radomska



2011, 48), this neologism presents performance art as a medium that not only seeks to resist the market, but which also involves various dynamics of materialization. Kurtycz writes:

Art-i-fact ingeniously eludes any attempt at definition, but it has certain constants, such as, for example, visceral sincerity. Art-i-fact is the polar opposite of commercial art (only thus could the former destroy the latter one day). The value of an event-art-i-fact consists of its multiple interpretations, according to the level and the mental state of the spectators (and/or actors).<sup>10</sup>

In a text about Kurtycz *oeuvre*, the noted Polish philosopher Stefan Morawski, who corresponded with the artist for more than two decades, describes this stark resistance to the market as a ‘spontaneous kind of anarchism [...] entirely free of doctrinal elements’. In explicit admiration, Morawski also contrasts what he calls the ‘sham qualities of postmodern art’ with the ‘spiritual splendor that radiates from Marcos Kurtycz’s anti-art (strictly speaking, his beyond-art)’.<sup>11</sup> While I shall not dwell on whether Kurtycz’s art possesses spiritual qualities, it is clear that, like in Bataille, the artist’s approach to destruction goes beyond an iconoclastic passion for effacement and seeks instead to produce a ritual poetics that is both performative and declassificatory. Indeed, one would be mistaken to understand Kurtycz’s ritual actions to have been primarily focused on the end product of this practice (the mere effacement of a painted canvas or an attack on painting *tout court*), instead of emphasizing those processes that take place during the ritual: the act of bringing near, touching, polluting or purifying; the confusion of subjectivities; the sharing of risk and intimacy; the possible reconfiguration of subject-object relations; the ritual act as an embodied form of transgression that indulges negligence and play.

Figure 10



This sort of negligence may be understood in relation to Giorgio Agamben's description of profanation as the possibility of challenging the distancing (and disciplining) effects of exhibitionary display, which not only privileges the gaze but also foregrounds the exchange value of art over its everyday or profane use value (2007, 73).<sup>12</sup> In this sense, one could argue that Kurtycz conceived of the museum and the art gallery as temple-like institutions that not only consecrated works and artists but also neutralized their social value and prevented the 'sacrificial' shedding of their 'sacred' aura. Yet Kurtycz's work did not simply seek to embrace the profane over the sacred, but strove for the mutual contamination of the two, in a movement that reminds us of Bataille's own hybrid rendering of sacred and profane. That is, as Joseph Libertson has discussed, Bataille's project is one that privileges contamination over synthesis and sustains the tension between opposing categories instead of aiming at their fusion or obliteration (1995, 212). In this sense, Bataille's writings introduce another level of complexity to an understanding of sacrifice as merely 'rendering sacred' or, correspondingly, profanation as merely 'rendering profane'. This thinker does not see the profane and the sacred as separate, homogeneous domains, but as fundamentally intertwined and heterogeneous; he conceives of

the sacred as being both holy and base, ‘entirely other yet intimate’ (Bois 1997a, 52). Likewise, for him, sacrifice, as potlatch or *dépense* is neither an opening up to the transcendental nor a concept linked to André Breton’s appropriation of the marvellous, but an experience of base materialism, entirely distant from organized religion and devoid of an idealist or transcendental conception of closure (53). Moreover, according to Neil Cox, the sort of ‘[b]ase materialism’ involved in Bataille’s conception of sacrificial acts, ‘has the job of de-class(ify)ing, which is to say, simultaneously lowering and liberating from all ontological prisons, from any “*devoir être*”’ (53). Rather than serving to create a stark line between sacrality and profanity, here sacrifice seeks to expose the confusion between these notions, to declassify them and expose their mutual contamination.

This declassificatory potential of ritual goes hand in hand with Victor Turner’s discussion of the production of a condition of liminality – and its accompanying liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’) – through ritual (1969, 95). Following the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, Turner describes the ritual dynamic as a societal process going through successive phases – ‘separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying ‘threshold’ in Latin) and aggregation’ – and involving different arrangements of time and space, paired with certain subjective dispositions or states (1969, 94). The liminal phase of ritual creates possibilities for the emergence of what Jeremy Biles calls the Bataillan ‘sacrifice of form’ or ‘monstrosity’ (2007, 63).<sup>13</sup> ‘Liminal entities’, writes Turner, ‘are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial’ (1969, 95). These entities have ambiguous and hybrid attributes that situate them at the margins of established social norms, identities and ranks. And, according to Turner, this social indeterminacy is expressed through a rich multiplicity of symbols: ‘liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality’ (1969, 95).

The rich symbolic imaginaries associated with a liminal state or a liminal subjectivity cannot but bring to mind the multiple descriptions of Kurtycz as a ‘Polish magician’, ‘shaman’, ‘exorcist’ and even ‘cultural terrorist’ in the Mexican press.<sup>14</sup> One could argue that Kurtycz occupied all of these positions and none. Above all else, he destabilized the division between Mexican and non-Mexican artist, for even though Kurtycz’s earliest artworks date back to his life in Poland, he became a performance artist in Mexico and ended up adopting Mexican nationality (facts that the press often preferred to ignore). In *Potlatch* the artist further intensified this identity confusion by himself embodying the sacrificial disposition of the arguably ‘ancient Mexican’ as anachronistically and exotically described by Bataille in *La Part maudite*.

Likewise, Kurtycz may be said to have come close to Joseph Beuys’ idea of the artist as shaman, insofar as he privileged the emotional and often strictly gestural elements of his art over its self-reflexivity, narrativity or conceptual closure (Foster et al. 2011, 527). Kurtycz’s shamanism was entirely simulacral, for he did not claim any exceptional quality for healing, nor did he call for a religious or societal reawakening. The artist’s shamanic associations were, by contrast, grounded in his theatrical embodiment of an expressive, repetitive and solemn gesturality that is often associated with archaic rituals led by shamanic figures. Thus, rather than partaking in an avant-garde celebration of innovation and originality, Kurtycz’s performances, like Jerzy Grotowski’s experimental theatre, endeavoured to recuperate a type of ‘corporeal unconscious’ that seemed to have been forgotten (Schechner 1993, 12). Indeed, Grotowski also conceived of his performances as ritual acts and paid special attention to the body’s movements and ‘resonances’ as well as to the affective intentionality of gesture (Osinski 1991, 103). Furthermore, Grotowski (who may or may not have had a direct influence on Kurtycz), defined the ‘performer’ as a ‘man of action’, namely, one who does not ‘play another’ but who, in performance, becomes ‘a dancer, a priest, a warrior’ (quoted by Osinski 1991, 105).

Kurtycz's exploration of his own forgotten gestural archive was deeply influenced by his experience of the violence of war in Nazi-occupied Poland. As Jennifer Burris observes, Kurtycz's 'long-standing preoccupation with self-destruction was [...] grounded in the traumatic experiences of his early childhood in Eastern Europe' (2015, 72), where most of the artist's relatives, including his mother, were victims of the Holocaust. Indeed, in his notebooks the artist made repeated references to his mother's death, often sketching her as someone about to be executed by firing squad. In the documentation accompanying the performance *Cruz-Cruz* [Cross-Cross] (1984), which was carried out in Tepoztlán, Mexico and involved burning a large-scale wooden swastika, the artist wrote:

The swastika, [...] the cross-over-a-cross is associated with myself; since childhood I have known how to survive and escape death [...] The fact is that I survived five years of war as a child; out of eighty people that constituted my family only three survived, my father, my sister and I. For me this symbol is very alive, a reminder of a strange and terrible occurrence in our century. But in itself it is not frightening it's funny, it's a heliocentric symbol, completely solar.

(Quoted in Alonso Espinosa 2014, 265)

Although these references to Kurtycz's memories of Nazism may at first glance feel far removed from the shamanic logic of his *Potlatch*, the artist perceived this action and *Cruz-Cruz* to be intimately associated. As one can observe in Figure 7, Kurtycz overwrote the title *Cruz-Cruz* on one of the few pictures of his action at the FCA, as if belatedly re-naming the original performance. Other references are present in Kurtycz's description of the swastika as a solar sign and his own use of a solar technique to produce the painting that became the 'sacrificial gift'.

The description of Kurtycz in the Mexican press as a terrorist brings us to a different, yet equally complex terrain, which echoes long-standing critical debates on the relationship between the avant-garde and violence. As Boris Groys suggests, both the avant-garde artist and the terrorist search for visibility through shock while sharing an aspiration for radicalism (to the point that ‘the worst thing that can be said of an artist [is that] his or her art is “harmless”’). Yet for Groys these two social categories can be said to promote different understandings of radicalism:

The terrorist, the warrior is radical – but he is not radical in the same sense as the artist is radical. He does not practice iconoclasm. Rather, he wants to reinforce belief in the image, to reinforce the iconophilic seduction, the iconophilic desire. And he takes exceptional, radical measures to end the history of iconoclasm, to end the critique of representation. (2008, 125)<sup>15</sup>

These words construe a fundamentally antagonistic relationship between the avant-garde artist and the terrorist, based on a seemingly clear difference in their relationship to iconicity. Groys even defines the terrorist as the ‘enemy of the modern artist, because he tries to create images that have a claim to be true and real – beyond any criticism of representation’ (126). Likewise, for this author, the terrorist strives to found the social bond on the basis of fear, while the artist relies on affect in order to destabilize social convention. This universalizing model, however, fails to take into account that when these concepts are not linked to a specific social setting they become increasingly fragile. In today’s world, where the category of the terrorist has gained prominence and lost almost any cultural or political specificity, these types of stark categorizations reduce terrorism to a unilateral and highly mediatized image of pure evil, ignoring changes in uses of the notion of ‘terror’ throughout history. Likewise, this perspective overlooks the possible strategic rendering by the state of certain public expressions of discontent

into acts of terror, with the aim of justifying repressive policies. Furthermore, by creating a distance between artists and terrorists, and calling them enemies, this view fails to take notice of the difficulties inherent in differentiating between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, real and staged (or simulacral) forms of violence.

Ultimately, Groys’ division disregards the Latin American experience between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, where, on the one hand, the definition of terror became entirely arbitrary, for states themselves practised terror while homogenizing all dissidence as ‘terrorism’, and on the other, guerrilla groupings adopted increasingly performative, not to say artistic, strategies. Among the latter, many were artists who did not conceive of their artistic practice as being separate from their political commitments (Camnitzer 2007, 53). Calling Kurtycz a ‘cultural terrorist’ in light of his bare-chested and self-sacrificial dances in front of impromptu audiences seems exaggerated and arguably inappropriate. Yet the artist himself repeatedly mobilized the semantic associations of terrorist warfare with his works by accompanying his embodied attacks on official art venues with ‘letter bombs’ threatening museum directors should they not incorporate new media, new creators and new publics into their politics of display.

### *Letter Bombing*

One of Kurtycz’s most openly combative projects against a Mexican art institution involved threatening to tear down a small portion of the outer wall of Mexico’s Modern Art Museum (MAM). Before carrying out this action, the artist sent a letter to the museum’s director Jorge Alberto Manrique (in tenure between 1987-88) which read:

The Museum is surrounded by a thick wall that drastically separates it from the real world. As a consequence I have decided not to set foot in the Museum of Modern Art until this insulting fence disappears. I demand that you remove it

within three months, thus avoiding severe physical consequences [...] I already have a mass event perfectly planned and programmed entitled: RECOVERED XPACE.<sup>16</sup>

Kurtycz's fury was triggered by a programming mistake, whereby one of his performances was planned for (and advertised as taking place on) a bank holiday, when the museum was closed. In light of the museum's poor administrative organization, Kurtycz's letter threatened the director with the reappropriation of the space by and for the public, in a democratizing move that would allow a more porous relationship between the museum's inside and outside. The artist did not follow up on his threats. Yet this letter served to express – and perform – his disagreement with the museum's stagnant institutionalality.

Five years earlier, the artist had carried out a similar action, in which he suddenly appeared at the MAM to announce to the then director Helen Escobedo (1982-83) that she would be subjected to bomb attacks. This verbal threat was followed by 365 'letter bombs' (one a day over a year), which encompassed a diverse array of communications sent by mail, each reflecting the artist's inventive use of collage and his exploration of a wide range of printing techniques, including directly imprinting with ink traces of his own body on the letters. The first letter bomb, sent on 31 October 1981, reads towards the end: 'It is a war. There will be no truce (unless mail rates rise)'. Despite the letter's threatening tone, the closing joke reveals the duality of its intentions, endorsing spontaneity and humour as the keys to challenging an institution. Kurtycz's 'bombardment' of the MAM therefore sought to incite Escobedo to open the museum to new media, while developing innovative forms of relationality between the former and the public realm. Escobedo recalls that, as absorbed as she was by bureaucratic practicalities, sometimes she did not even have 'time to open them, they kept piling up' (2007, n.p.). Even as a mountain on the museum director's desk, however, Kurtycz's bombs did not



go unnoticed; if only for their arresting envelopes (one of which juxtaposes Escobedo's name 'Helen' with the word *muerte* [death], written backwards in capital letters) (see Figure 11). Escobedo continues: 'the tone of the letter bombs was varied: sometimes poetic, sometimes angry, sometimes grotesque, never straightforward' (2007, n.p.). Yet, rather than being directly harmful, aggressive or explosive, the bombs were meant to be provocative, simultaneously triggering fear and laughter, while motivating the receiver to act (creatively) in response (see Figure 12).

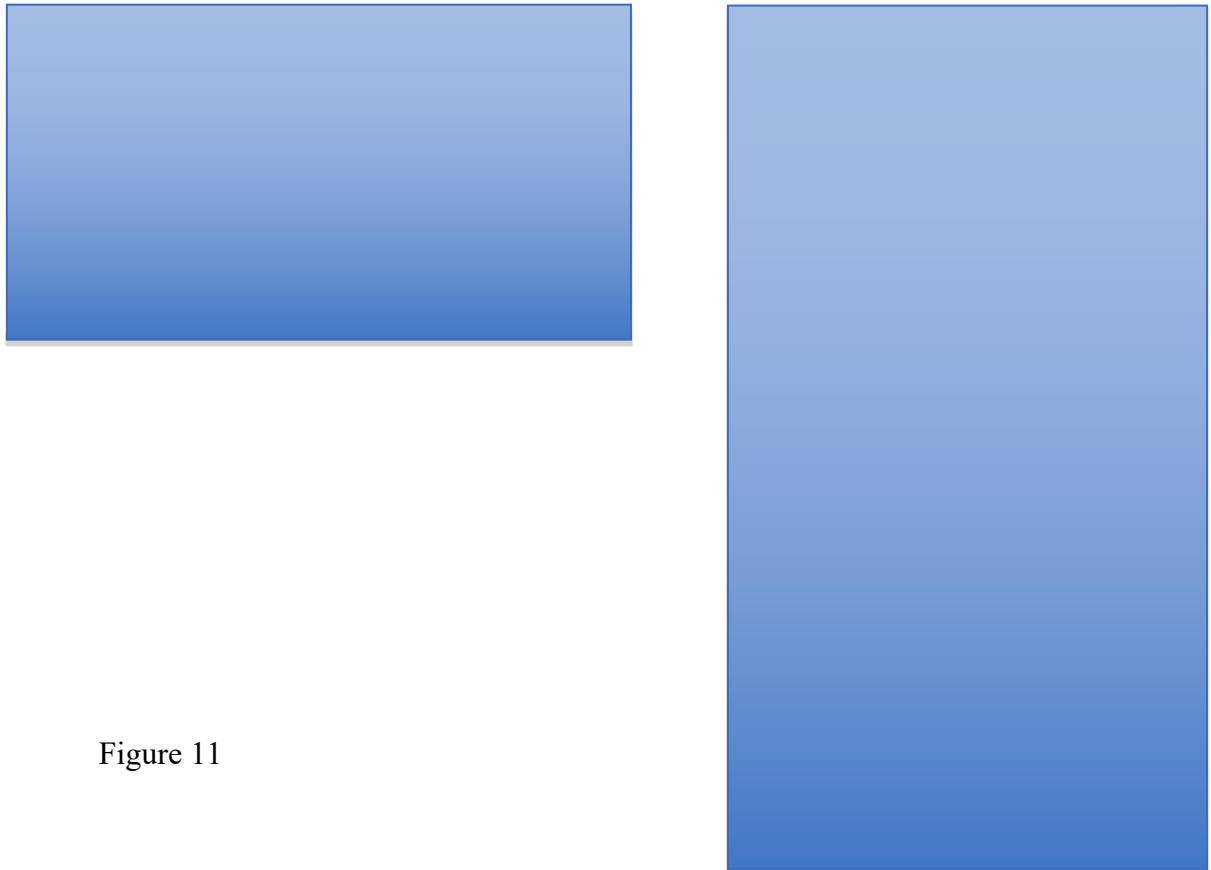


Figure 11

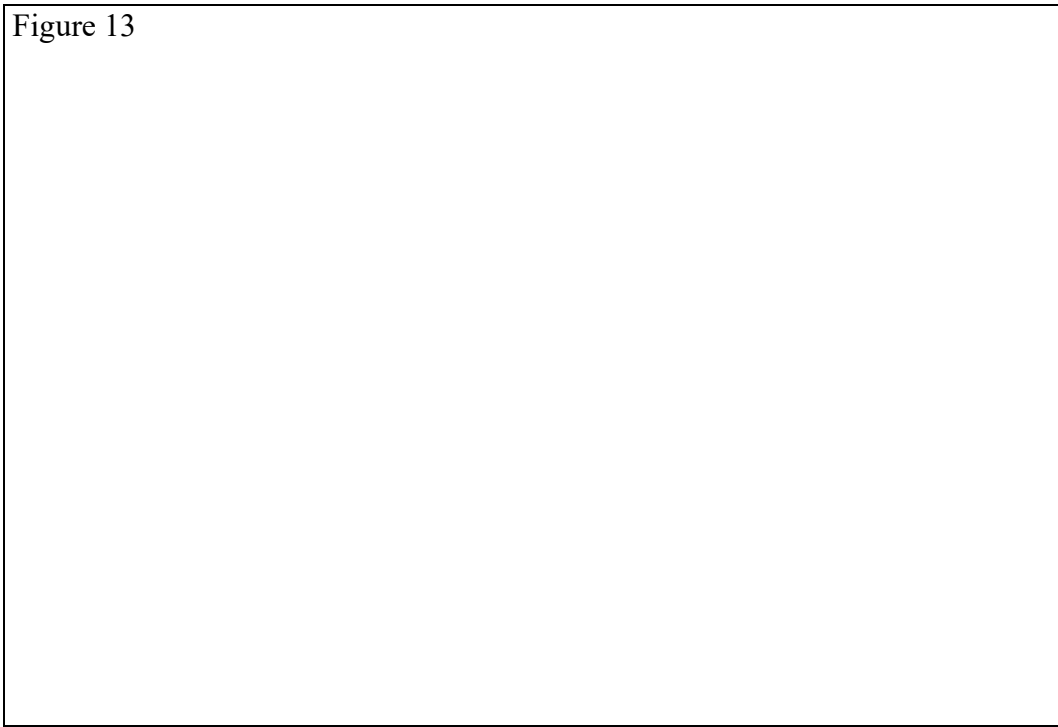
Figure 12

Although it might easily go unnoticed, there is a significant link between Kurtycz's *Potlatch* and his letter bombs, because the latter's affective demand for a binding response from the receiver recalls the idea of the 'gift or rivalry' – which in Mauss' theory is tied to the circularity of exchange through the notion of the counter-gift (Mauss 2002, 95). During her tenure at the MAM, Escobedo, herself a sculptor, did not consider these letters to be 'art' or keep them in the museum's archive, but instead kept this correspondence for herself (in what would later on become her personal archive). Yet, according to Rita Eder's recently published history of the MAM during Escobedo's tenure, the sculptor conducted a silent dialogue with Kurtycz as she launched a series of major transformations to open up the museum to new media and embodied practices:

With hindsight, it seems that Escobedo's days in the museum elapsed in tandem with this character who provoked art with his invention of actions whose strange delicateness alluded to an extreme collective and individual violence, and who submitted the body of the artist to rigorous performative acts and a visual practice of paradox and irony. (Eder 2010, 35, 146, my translation on the basis of the bilingual edition)

Paradoxically, closing the cycle of gifts and counter-gifts, desecration and consecration which characterized Kurtycz's relationship to the MAM, the artist's letter bombs returned to the museum in 2013, as part of the exhibition *Obras son amores* [Works are Loved Ones] that revisited artistic production in Mexico from 1964 to 1992. This time, Kurtycz's letter bombs did not need to infiltrate the institution clandestinely, for they were displayed as an 'established' form of art that had been influenced by movements like Fluxus and hence could be understood institutionally as mail or postal art.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 13



In 1982, three years after *Potlatch*, Kurtycz printed a self-promotional triptych leaflet which further emphasized his identification with Bataille. The leaflet's inside pages displayed six successive stages in the process of destruction of a photographic self-portrait, burnt by the artist with fire (see Figure 13). In one of the leaflet's outside pages, Kurtycz printed a summary of his biography (beginning: 'I was born in Poland, an important but not very pleasant fact. Look. As a child, I made it through the war. I was eight when my mum was killed') and, in another, he cited a long excerpt from *La Part maudite*, translated by Elizondo. In line with Bataille's blood-soaked primitivism, the text, entitled *La víctima sagrada y maldita* [The Sacred and Accursed Victim], refers to the Aztec practice of sacrifice, stating that from the moment of being 'chosen' the sacrificial victim is 'destined for violent consumption'. In other words, the victim becomes, 'the accursed share [...] But the curse tears him away from the *order of things*, it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings'.

The text then continues by construing sacrifice as comprising ‘a mixture of anguish and frenzy’ that resulted from not just any form of excess, but from ‘excess [...] that went beyond the bounds, and whose consumption appeared worthy of the gods’. ‘This was the price’, writes Bataille, ‘men paid to escape their downfall and remove the weight introduced in them by the avarice and cold calculation of the real order’.

In this excerpt, the sacrificial victim escapes the state of ‘thing’, thus renouncing any social utility and entering the unstable and Janus-faced domain of the sacred that is ‘at once life-giving and death-dealing’ (Eagleton 2005, 115). As stressed by Rosalind E. Krauss, it was this ‘double condition of the sacred’ (1986, 55) that interested Bataille in his approach to Aztec sacrifices as he referred to the ‘astonishingly joyous character of these horrors’ (Bataille 1970, 157). By bringing together this text, his own bibliography and his burnt portrait in this leaflet, Kurtycz seems to suggest a self-identification with the sacrificial victim.<sup>18</sup> There is, however, an unsettlingly controlled aspect of this approach to self-erasure. The division of the destruction of Kurtycz’s portrait into six stages reveals the delicately controlled and mediated character of this production of a (self-)sacrificial sensibility. In this light, Kurtycz’s serialized staging of the incineration of his own face echoes Éli Lotar’s series of pictures of the butchery at La Villette, in Paris, which accompanied the entry ‘Abattoir’ in *Documents’* Critical Dictionary.<sup>19</sup> In one of Lotar’s pictures two rows of chopped cows’ feet are depicted as carefully cleaned and aligned against an exterior wall, an image that resists Bataille’s initial attempt to associate the butchery with ‘the mythic mysteries and lugubrious grandeur typical of those places in which blood flows’ (1970, 205). Yve-Alain Bois considers these pictures as a ‘kind of climax, within the journal, of the iconography on horror’ (1997b, 43). Paradoxically, however, this feeling did not result from their depiction of unbounded blood and indiscriminate mutilation, but from their ‘sinister’ representation of killing as an orderly, symmetrical fully systematic act (44). For Bois, these images suggest that ‘it is not violence as such that interests Bataille, but its civilized

scotomization that structures it as otherness, as heterogeneous disorder' (46). That is, Bataille conceives of violence as deeply entrenched in human societies, and therefore only able to be understood as 'other' through its organized veiling. As revealed in his serialized portrait, a similar treatment of violence seems to traverse Kurtycz's work, yet in this case the artist's controlled impulse towards self-erasure both cloaks and makes visible the violence of his iconoclastic critique of figuration. Likewise, here the artist puts into tension the arguably false distinction between creation and destruction.

... by *Way of Proximity*

Focusing on the place of violence and ritual in Kurtycz's performance art, this chapter has offered a close reading of the artist's 1979 *Potlatch* at the FCA. I have argued that this work partakes in the *profanation* of the symbolic and marketable value of art while, concomitantly, creating the conditions for its *consecration* as a lived, ritual experience similar to play in that it structures a series of actions, movements and interactions without being linked to any particular mythology, political or otherwise.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the live action explores the de-classificatory potentiality of ritual, indulging in what Turner describes as the 'opening up' of time and space. In other words, the artist's violent entry into the art gallery not only marked a temporal break but also made visible the time-dependency of the artwork's sensory effects. *Potlatch* profoundly affected the gallery's usual dynamics of sociability, as the spatial disposition of the public changed in relation to people's interest in becoming part of the performance (and coming close to one another while encircling the artist, possibly putting themselves at risk of receiving a drop of the falling acid) or remaining distant from it, ignoring the artist's interruption of the 'official' event. Fully exploring the liminal ambiguity characteristic of ritual process, Kurtycz may be said to have embodied the roles of thespian, saboteur and shaman; to have conducted a risk-infused playful ritual and conceived of it, in Richard Schechner's words, as 'liminal-liminoid,

unauthorized, antistructural, subjective (“if”), and subversive’ (1993, 256). The liminal quality of certain performative practices opens the way for new models of embodiment and social structuring, but rejects bringing them to a state of closure, because, as suggested by Schechner, rather than being an experience oriented towards the establishment of new foundations, they allow the subject to experiment with new ontic possibilities. I see Kurtycz’s embrace of indeterminacy and (what Morawski saw as) his ‘anarchist’ resistance to align his art with any predefined political goal as embodying a shift away from the distanced antagonism of earlier experiences of political art both in Mexico and the Southern Cone and towards the practice of *déchirure* (using Bataille’s terminology) or exposure by way of proximity. ‘*Déchirure*’ in Bataille, as Didi-Huberman suggests, ‘always begins as access, as contact. It is here that touch exposes, it is the transgression of the taboo of touch which, almost always, ends by *opening up* concepts or words’ (1995, 36, original emphais).<sup>21</sup> Thus, in Kurtycz’s ritual performances, the act of institutional profanation unfolds through direct contact with the institution, its infiltration, the (expository) play with its norms and categories and the search *in situ* for new forms of contact and organization of artist, artwork, public and exhibitionary space. In this process, all of these categories are closely dependent upon each other, yet also mutable, re-imaginable and, ultimately, sacrificable.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The exact number of murdered students in 1968 remains unknown (Rodda 2012, 18). As Alexander Aviña points out, in 2002, ‘the Mexican government created a special office to investigate human rights violations committed by the PRI regime from 1960s to 1980s’. However, the final report on the ‘Dirty War’, released in 2006 by the Fiscalía Especial para Movimientos Sociales y Políticos del Pasado [Special Prosecutor’s Office for Past Social and Political Movements] ‘proved to have been censored’ (Aviña 2014, 184). As I conclude this chapter in March 2015, the Mexican government has also declared all documentation about this episode confidential, and therefore unavailable for research or legal purposes. For further discussion of this event and its political and artistic resonances, see Robin Greeley’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> The PRI rose to power at the end of the 1910 Revolution. Deeply entrenched in the structure of the Mexican state, the party was responsible for the country’s modernization, undertaking major social reforms over the course of the twentieth century, such as land reform and the nationalization of the oil industry. Its rule, however, was characterized by clientelism and authoritarianism (Camp 1999). Having stayed in office for more than seventy years, from 1929 to 2000 (only to return to power in 2012), the official revolutionary rhetoric became increasingly empty over the years (Monsiváis 2005, 12). Further attention to the relationship between the PRI regime and art is given in Erica Segre’s, Zanna Gilbert’s and Robin Greeley’s chapters in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> See Alvaro Vázquez Mantecón (2014, 196).

<sup>4</sup> Marcos Kurtycz, ‘Texto sobre el evento en el Foro el día 1 de noviembre de 19790’, Kurtycz Archive. It was not Bataille but Elizondo who included Bataille’s comments on Aztec sacrifices in the prologue to his translation of Bataille’s erotic novella *Madame Edwarda*, published under the pseudonym Pierre Angélique in 1937.

<sup>5</sup> *Petate* (from the Nahuatl *petlatl*) is a bedroll made of natural fibres, often used in Mexico and Central America to rest or sleep on the floor.

<sup>6</sup> Kurtycz, ‘Texto sobre el evento en el Foro’, Kurtycz Archive (hereafter KA).

<sup>7</sup> I am using the term ‘expose’ with explicit reference to Bataille’s notion of *déchirement*, which Patrick ffrench translates as ‘absolute exposure’ (2007, 78).

<sup>8</sup> Kurtycz, ‘Texto sobre el evento en el Foro’, KA.

<sup>9</sup> The Lettrist International information bulletin, published between 1954 and 1957, was also entitled *Potlatch*.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Arte Facto Kurtycz', 26 February 1982, self-publication, KA.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Morawski, 'De los recuerdos sobre Marcos Kurtycz', 1999, KA.

<sup>12</sup> Quoting the Roman jurist Trebatius, Agamben writes: 'profane is the term for something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of men' (2007, 73). In a similar vein, profanation in Levinas has been described as 'the contrary of any act or process of sanctification, or sacralization' (Bergo 1999, 112). The term *pro-fanare* derives from the Latin word for temple, *fanum*. 'The pro-fane is that which comes to pass before, and by extension outside of, the temple. Thus the profane is outside of the space of the holy' (112).

<sup>13</sup> According to Biles, 'for Bataille, the concept of monstrosity is itself a monstrous concept, bearing the distinctive marks of what it designates – that which is ambiguous, contradictory, impure, dangerous, fearful, and often ridiculous' (2007, 63).

<sup>14</sup> Each of these attributes comes respectively from Mariotte (1985, 3), Appi (1985,6), Mariotte (1985, 3) and Cortés (1985, n.p.).

<sup>15</sup> Groys' discussion focuses on post-9/11 use of video and film techniques by presumed members of Al-Qaeda, in which it becomes especially difficult to distinguish between a staged violent act, such as a mock beheading, and a real one.

<sup>16</sup> Letter dated 'Prima Aprilis 1987' (*sic*), KA.

<sup>17</sup> The exhibition not only included a vitrine with Kurtycz's letter bombs but also an entire wall covered by postings kept by Santiago Rebolledo, for which the caption read: 'corresponded/matched lives: mail art collection 70s-90s'.

<sup>18</sup> Kurtycz circulated the leaflet as part of his letter bombing projects.

<sup>19</sup> In 1929 Bataille founded the review *Documents* in an attempt to develop a 'war machine against received ideas' (Bradley and Ades 2006, 11). Central to this symbolic struggle was the review's 'Critical Dictionary', aimed at providing 'not the meaning but the tasks of words (12) – claiming, for instance, that '*formless* is not only an adjective with a given meaning but a term which declassifies' (Bataille 1992, 92).

<sup>20</sup> For Agamben profanation does not entail an attitude of indifference or disbelief, but the possibility of disregarding normativized or disciplining distances, that is, of challenging separations and divisions between objects and people and exploring profane forms of intimacy and proximity. He also describes this form of 'distracted' or negligent engagement in profanation as a form of play, or put differently, as the practice of rites without myths, a practice which disrupts the consubstantial unity between myth and rite that founds the sacred (2007, 75).

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<sup>21</sup> Agamben posits that corporeal contact (*contagione*) and physical touch have often been understood as able to return to use what sacrificial rituals had rendered sacred or separate (2007, 74).